

MOREY PEAK WILDERNESS STUDY AREA

I. THE STUDY AREA - 20,120 acres

The Morey Peak WSA (NV-060-191) is located in northeastern Nye County, Nevada approximately 70 miles east of Tonopah. The WSA includes 20,120 acres of public lands. The WSA is bounded on the west by South Sixmile Canyon road. The northern boundary is generally along land net lines. The northeastern boundary is unnamed dirt roads. Most of the eastern boundary follows the fenceline until it crosses the Hot Creek Station to Moores Station road, except for the AEC storage site and the Hobble Creek and Hobble Creek aqueduct triangle. The Morey Peak WSA lies in the Hot Creek Range adjacent to the southeastern portion of the Fandango WSA and includes a small portion of Hot Creek Valley. The study area is oblong shaped measuring 12 miles north to south and six miles east to west.

The National Forest and Public Lands of Nevada Enhancement Act of 1988 (P.L. 100-550) transferred administrative jurisdiction of 15,050 acres in the WSA to the Toiyabe National Forest leaving 5,070 acres under BLM management.

There were four alternatives analyzed in the EIS: an all wilderness alternative, a no wilderness alternative, a partial wilderness alternative which is the recommendation of this report where 14,560 acres would be designated as wilderness and 5,560 acres would be released for uses other than wilderness and a second partial wilderness alternative which would involve combining the Morey Peak and Fandango WSAs and designating 46,300 acres as wilderness and releasing 14,760 acres for uses other than wilderness.

2. RECOMMENDATION AND RATIONALE - 13,950 acres recommended for wilderness **6,170 acres recommended for nonwilderness**

The recommendation for this WSA is to designate 13,950 acres as wilderness and release 6,170 acres for uses other than wilderness. This recommendation is 610 acres less than proposed in the EIS. An area of high mineral potential (gold) was identified by USGS after the EIS was completed. The all wilderness alternative is considered the environmentally preferable alternative as it would result in the least change from the natural environment over the long-term.

The central point of interest in the WSA is Morey Peak, which rises to over 10,240 feet. The peak is rugged and provides the dominant topographic point from all surrounding valleys. The slopes of Morey Peak are gouged with a myriad of steeply walled canyons capped by rocky spires. The rocky and barren peaks give way to dense stands of pinyon pine, juniper, mountain mahogany, limber pine, and ancient bristlecone pine as the mountain gives way to the valley floors 5,000 feet below. At the southern base of Morey Peak is Hobble Canyon. Several seeps and springs are found within the canyon and, in combination with the dense timber, provide a cool, moist respite from the scorching summer heat in the desert only a few hundred yards away. The steep slopes rapidly give way to broad alluvial benches which skirt the eastern and southern approaches to the mountains.

The WSA provides habitat for a wide array of wildlife and supports the largest populations of big game in the Tonopah Resource Area. The craggy cliffs of Morey peak are home to the nimble desert bighorn sheep. Large populations of mountain lion also inhabit the dense timber of Morey Peak. The WSA is critical winter range to a large population of mule deer. Occasional, yet increasingly more frequent, sightings of elk round out the WSA's big game population. Hot desert winds rising up the steep slopes of the mountain provide excellent soaring conditions for a wide variety of raptors.

The WSA abounds in prehistoric cultural resource sites with animal traps, petroglyphs, and pictographs

scattered throughout the area. Historic sites are also common along the edge of the area recommended for wilderness. The charcoal kilns located in the south Sixmile canyon are of particular interest. Constructed in the 1870s to provide charcoal for smelting furnaces in the adjoining mining districts.

All of the attributes mentioned above, combine to make an exceptional area with high wilderness values, which are believed to outweigh other, competing resource uses and potential uses.

Two areas were not recommended for wilderness designation. The northern portions of the WSA adjoin an old mining district and were found to have high mineral potential. The mining disturbance along the northern boundary serve as physical evidence of the high mineral potential in and around the area. Roads, exploration pits, drill holes, and scrap metal and machinery detract from the feeling of solitude and naturalness. The broad alluvial benches skirting the base of Morey Peak were not recommended for wilderness designation. Portions of the bench were found to have moderate mineral potential and evidence of past exploration are readily evident. Manageability of the area would be more difficult due to the open, easily accessible nature of the terrain where control of off-road vehicles would require more frequent patrols. The 610 acre area surrounding some high potential mineral sites, and the lower alluvial fans that lack the opportunities for solitude, are influenced by vehicle traffic on the nearby roads and lack the special features that attract visitors to the interior of the WSA.

3. WILDERNESS CHARACTERISTICS

A. Naturalness: The recommended portions of the WSA are in a natural condition. The rugged terrain of the upper slopes of Morey Peak have held the activities of man at bay. Forbidding cliffs, deep narrow canyons and areas of dense timber serve to hamper movement and enhance the naturalness of these areas. Morey Peak is one of the least accessible mountains in central Nevada owing to it's precipitous rise from the valley floor. The central core of the WSA is in virtually pristine condition.

Within the boundaries of the WSA are approximately two miles of ways and two miles of pipeline. The recommended area of WSA contains the two miles of ways. These are found primarily in the canyons adjacent to existing boundary roads. The two miles of pipeline are located along the eastern boundary in the area recommended for uses other than wilderness. Numerous areas of mineral exploration exist along the boundaries and the disturbances commonly associated with mining operations are many. The areas surrounding the kilns were once clear cut of all timber. Reforestation of the surrounding slopes has been achieved through the long ago abandonment of using charcoal to fuel the smelters, but the inherent legacy of those clear cut can not be ignored.

The ruggedness of Morey Peak coupled with the dense timber dressing on it's side couple to mask the man made intrusions located at the lower elevations thereby minimizing the negatives associated with those disturbances.

B. Solitude: The opportunities for solitude in the Morey Peak WSA are outstanding. The WSA consists almost entirely of Morey Peak and its surrounding lesser peaks. Topographic screening is provided by the many canyons and the rugged layout of the mountainous terrain. Adding to this is the dense tree cover blanketing all approaches to the peak and the precipitous rise of the mountains from the valley below. Also adding to the solitude is the lack of destination points. The summit of Morey Peak and associated ridges, with their protective vertical rock walls will appeal to only the more intrepid hiker. Complete solitude may be achieved along any peak of rock outcrop along the summit of the ridge. Recreational use would be distributed throughout the WSA, helping their natural carrying capacity of the area absorb a number of users while still ensuing each their solitude.

The alluvial fans skirting the eastern and southern boundaries of the mountains provide little in the way of solitude.

C. Primitive and Unconfined Recreation: Outstanding opportunities for primitive recreation exist within the Morey Peak WSA. The foremost is the provocative challenge climbing Morey Peak provides. Both technical and non-technical routes may be found throughout the peaks and surrounding ridges. Along the many approaches to the summit, opportunity to observe desert bighorn sheep at close range in an undisturbed setting among the rock and bristlecone pine abound. Large seasonal populations of mule deer may be seen at virtually any location within the WSA. Chance encounters with mountain lion and elk will also add to the recreational values.

Prehistoric sites are also common throughout the WSA. The diversity of the area will appeal to the photographer.

D. Special Features: The Morey Peak WSA has six charcoal kilns. These kilns are an important remnant of the historic past of Nevada and are in excellent condition. This WSA contains one of only two known locations where bristlecone pines are growing in volcanic soils. Bristlecone pines alone are of special interest because they are the oldest living things known and are only found in a few high elevations in the United States.

4. MANAGEABILITY

The 13,950 acres recommended for wilderness designation can reasonably be managed as wilderness to preserve values now present in the area. There are no expected manageability problems.

It is expected that the 6,170 acres not recommended for wilderness designation will have problems preventing adverse impact on naturalness and solitude caused by off-road vehicle use.

5. ENERGY AND MINERAL RESOURCE VALUES

The US Geological Survey and the US Bureau of Mines investigated the Morey Peak WSA. While the area is estimated to have low or no potential for petroleum, gas, uranium, and geothermal energy, two small (less than 200 acres) areas have a high potential for silver, lead, and zinc resources and two areas, one along the north boundary and the other in the Hobble Canyon areas, have a moderate resource potential for silver, lead and zinc. The area along the north boundary was designated as moderate in the EIS. The area along Hobble Canyon was not designated in the EIS.

6. SUMMARY OF WSA-SPECIFIC PUBLIC COMMENTS

During formal public review of the draft EIS, a total of 21 comments specifically addressing this WSA were received. Six individuals, one environmental organization and two state agencies favored the Morey Peak WSA designation and five individuals, one mining organization, five mining companies and one local government opposed this designation. Reasons supporting designation were: outstanding area, provides challenging terrain, good scenic values. Reasons supporting nondesignation were: enormous mineral and energy potential, mining districts located on all sides, accurate mapping not done to properly assess mineral potential.

The State, during the consistency review, did not concur with the Preferred Alternative. The State feels that wilderness designation will adversely affect wildlife management by eliminating opportunities to effectively manage habitat. Hunter use would be adversely affected by reduction of access. Mineral values are high and wilderness values are not high enough to outweigh these conflicts.